

**A Call to Arms
to save the largest open-air assemblage of Upper
Paleolithic art in Europe
from being drowned
NOW
behind a rising dam
at Foz Côa, Portugal**

**OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND
THE CONSPIRACY TO FLOOD THE SEVENTH WONDER OF PREHISTORY**

1994 was the greatest year yet for discoveries of rich concentrations of Paleolithic art. Not only were frescoes of rhinos, horses and lions over 30,000 years old found in a cave in the Ardeche on Dec. 18th¹, but Europe's biggest open-air gallery of Paleolithic animals was reported just a month earlier in the Côa Valley of northeastern Portugal². While the paintings in the French cave, which became known as the Grotte Chauvet, often have engraved contours, the Portuguese menagerie may also have been painted, but, being outdoors, their pigments have usually weathered away. All that remains, where jagged outcroppings of schist jut from brushy slopes - exposing terminal facets perfect for murals - are hauntingly sinuous outlines of deer, horses, ibexes, and wild cattle called aurochs.

Based on stylistic comparisons such as striations inside body contours and the presentation of horns in twisted perspective, several Paleolithic art experts, including the first curator of the Chauvet Cave, Jean Clottes, have accredited the Portuguese friezes to the early Solutrean of about 20,000 years ago³. Although they're probably right, it's worth noting that these same specialists used similar criteria to ascribe the animals of Chauvet to the same period - until carbon 14 results pushed their age back over 10,000 years, shattering the notion that prehistoric art had evolved linearly, like technologies. Regardless of how old the Côa's art turns out to be, it is unique in its richness above ground and astonishing in its illustrations of movement - with animals tossing their heads with the same stop-action dynamism found at Chauvet and only millennia later in photography and Futurist painting.

But the governments' responses to the discoveries could not have been more different. In France, the Ministry of Culture placed its new treasure under the most draconian protection, despite the fact that the country already has the lion's share of Paleolithic art. The Chauvet Cave's prehistoric bestiary was proudly splashed across magazines around the world.

In Portugal, the government did the opposite – plunging ahead with a project destined to destroy the nation’s oldest cultural heritage by completing a 300-million-dollar dam whose reservoir will flood a valley packed with dozens of art sites spread over at least 17 kilometers. Standing right in front of some of the most spectacular engravings, the Secretary of State for Culture dismissed them as being nothing more than “children’s doodles” – whereupon the students from Foz Côa’s high school turned the official into a laughing-stock by presenting him with a schist slab covered with their own scribbles⁴. In an on-going cover-up and attempt to diminish the find’s exposure, journalists from the BBC and elsewhere were barred from the valley – and the state-owned electrical utility, or EDP⁵, hastened to erect the mighty concrete wall that would doom the engravings behind a fait accompli. The cover-up of the art’s very existence by the EDP and Portuguese national archaeological authority, or IPPAR, which learned of the discovery at least a year before announcing them, as well as a mud-slinging feud between its discoverer and the archaeologists he brought in to witness his finds, and the ensuing public outcry have set Portugal’s ceremonial president from the left against the right-wing Prime Minister’s dam project, as Portuguese citizens have demonstrated in the streets.

Yet construction continues - even on holidays - and the water is about to rise another hundred meters. It's now or never, the author of the following article decided in April 1995, as he set out to evaluate the engravings, find out the truth, and propose solutions.

A male ibex with his head shown in two positions, as if he were turning to watch the female behind him. Quinta de Barca, opposite Penascosa. Côa Valley.



By Duncan Caldwell

I expected the authorities to block us. My 13-year old son and I had flown to Porto in Portugal and driven far up the Douro valley into the northeastern mountains, prepared to maneuver around obstructions whether by negotiation or hiking through the back door.

As we drove up to a sentry box perched on the lip of a road into the vast, unnatural gashing of mountains at Foz Côa, it was hard to tell if the young guard blocking us in

a crisp red and gray uniform represented a well-heeled security service or an elite military unit - but it was plain that bluff and sweet talk wouldn't get us far. Still, here was our first encounter with the powers that be, so I took this opportunity to probe, and get a first step up the hierarchical ladder. After all, we'd want to pass this way again.

There I was; grizzled beard, dusty boots, worn jeans and heavy sweater; the archetype of an archaeologist and professor, and teaching had, in fact, given me experience in cajolery, and knowing when to let up. So I explained how Sebastian and I had come so far to see the Paleolithic glories that Portugal would be displaying with pride, spoke of credentials, and placed us (and our pen) in his hands. Soon, the guard turned into a regular lad, wrote down the chief engineer's name and pointed beyond the ramp-laced moonscape - into the wilderness. Out there was our Grail.

But he shied at the last moment, and wouldn't quite say where. Still, we had our bearings, and drove off into the late afternoon to penetrate the heart of the forbidden zone.

The first few stabs were dead-ends: a quarry where slate pickets for vines were carved from chasms; a burning dump with the hairy leg of a cow sticking from a fire; a slab overhanging orchards where a feral dog, with a coat as motley and brindled as a hyena's, galloped for cover. We were getting closer, very close now, and could spy loops of a trail among the folds of a distant ridge.

The next time the car eased over the knuckles of a road crisscrossed by up-ended strata, past empty huts built just of stacked slabs, and jostled between overhanging and plunging cliffs until an avalanche of tailings from an old quarry almost blocked the path. Our wheels inched along a disintegrating brink. But, suddenly, water glinted below. Draped before us, canyon facades promised a gallery befitting a once open planet.

Here was one of the places of grandeur where our ancestors had first grasped visions and then concretized them by hewing - and sometimes painting - images into rock panels. And here too was the arena where one of the greatest feuds between discoverers and custodians of the past had exploded since the conflict between Othniel Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope over the fossils of extinct giants in Sioux territory during Custer's battles. In this walled garden, the conflicting passions of archaeologists had exploded around a campfire, set a president and prime minister against each other, and cowed the emissaries of UNESCO. We would be the first to camp around embers that had sparked brush fires around the world.

But, first, to business! With swifts swirling in up-drafts around our heads, we scrambled and picked our way among sheer precipices and ledges. Lizards skidded into fissures, a rusty blade wedged in a nook beside a sliver of cliff garden spoke of an emigrant who had never returned, but the walls seemed barren. As shadows

welled from the valley, we turned from the scarps and trundled downwards into the cleavage, till the road turned into a path to the water through a profusion of poppies.

Around us was the raw embrace of another abandoned quarry. Its tight horseshoe of cliffs and rubble made the perfect hiding place for our car and tent from the gray guards roaming the surrounding crests with binoculars. And before us lay the broadened river. No current showed amid the algal stagnation that had deadened deepened waters. The first flurry of press articles had mentioned that many of the engravings were already submerged by the cofferdam holding the river back for the more monstrous wall rising downstream from it. But, still, the river managed a pulse. Intermittent splashes smacked echoes off the walls, a frog croaked and some beast keened a cry we had never heard. We couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't the last of its kind.



We hid the car & tent inside this quarry & conducted surveys for engravings at dawn & dusk, when we were least likely to be spotted & slanting light made it easier to see faint incisions.

The next morning I tossed awake in the dewy chill as dawn brimmed over the peaks. Sebastian snuggled tighter into his sleeping bag, so I set out to reconnoiter alone, systematically working quadrants and contours between our quarry at Fariseu and Piscos brook. As I did so, tinkling sounded high on the opposite slope. Finally, I discerned a flock ambling down through dry brush, then a shirt flashed a white dot, and we converged within hailing distance on opposite banks. I sent greetings and the shepherd expostulated and gestured animatedly upstream towards towering slabs.

As I pushed forward and the river grew shallower, turtles became so numerous that their stacks toppled like circus acts from the brinks of submerged cliffs. Somewhere among the jumble of a thousand rock faces would be an ancient image - perhaps masked by lichen or so faint one had to trace its parts before seeing it whole. Over and over again, the scene seemed set, the rock stretched, but its lines were just fractals. Even ideal panels on either side of a fig tree bulging titanically from a small cave were barren. Surely they had sheltered here....

Then, up there, a line ran *across* the grain - and another curved into it! A TAIL! I yanked myself up to a platform less than a step wide and a ten-foot long cow - an

auroch! - the wild primordial ancestor of longhorns and lunging bulls, strode beside me. *Magic*.

As a draftsman, I could feel empathy for the beast flowing into the hands that had etched her. The auroch's grace and concision was the pith of observation. By holding the animal's form and movement vividly in mind, the maker had poured himself into its body and experienced a power beyond abstraction, beyond even tool-making, to thrill to the new power of passing through the looking-glass into another being. *Magic indeed*. For me, all of mankind's later accomplishments, all our later experience of good and evil only become possible after such art. And so, forgive me, but in comparison to these ancient windows, cathedrals seem to have anti-climatic and overwrought power. I nearly took a step back in my excitement.

This first frieze stood at a fitting point, practically where the reservoir yielded to the original rapids and long pools of the virgin river. The numbed waters suddenly spangled upstream with glitter and so many flowery white tresses of water plants that the currents looked like sudsy pastures. A stream, running pure as its springs over crisp cresses between alternating bull rushes and crags, almost made it to the river unaltered, but met it just below the threshold and sank into an estuary. If there had been a living site, it had been there, at the mouth of Piscos brook, almost at the auroch's feet.⁶

When I peered in, huge mud-colored carp patrolled over the dueling flash of silver flanks. The creek was teeming! And all around now, life had broken out. A stand of poplar trees crackled like Chinese New Year with small birds, abundant as leaves. Peepers to bullfrogs kept up another side of the orchestra. Except for the absence now of bigger species, this was how Solutreans had experienced the world - with whistling, mooing, barking, roaring and trumpeting not just on the Serengeti, but to the frozen north!

I turned back, amidst turtles flipping off their stools all over again. It was time to take a stroll down the corridors of power.

The confluence of the Ribeira de Piscos (Piscos Brook) & the Côa River, looking upstream without the rapids that appear when the Pocinho Reservoir is lower.





Another gigantic engraving of an auroch high on an outcropping at Quinta de Barca, opposite Penascosa in the Côa Valley.

- PROMETHEUS BOUND -

Far away across the moonscape of rutted ramps, knots of men stood before tunnels as fleets of dump trucks, made so tiny by distance that they only gave away their magnitude by over-sized wheels, eased to the brink of platforms, and added avalanches to tailings. Explosions roared and the dust of sundered mountains filled the enormous enterprise. We had arrived at Pandemonium and would try to insinuate ourselves into an audience with the Chief Engineer himself. It was a good thing we had his name, Lima Monteiro, because the Securitas guard on this side meant business.

Above us, the titanium-white cleanliness of the cement plant's towers stood in bold contrast to the devastation, like a phalanx of gigantic chess-rooks bunched for the kill. Below them, a half dozen building complexes were set on shelves on the crater walls. Only one was so spotless and redolent of perks, though, with its rolled lawn incongruous in the desert, that we knew right where to head among forking roads. Our compact car slid in among Mercedes and I stepped into glare, drawing cool

stares from fleshy faces. No *problema*, I've stridden through institutions with a beard and badge for years now.

As I entered, a group of professionals appraised me and went on talking shop. When I took advantage of a lull to launch my request, I heard the ricocheting mention of "archaeologist" and "*gravuras*" wrapped with uneasy disdain. I was hardly surprised when these well-fed pros passed the buck to the only gaunt and partially toothless fellow traveler among them. My interlocutor explained that the Chief Engineer was powerless to help me, so he couldn't be bothered to give me an audience.

Still, my gentle persistence posed a problem. After all the noisy demonstrations against the dam in Lisbon, how were they to know how much clout a nosy prehistorian might have? So they decided to play it safe by dumping me on their pet nemesis, the organization's own archaeological "hireling", Dr. Nelson Rebanda.

According to press articles, the dam-builders had recognized him as the true discoverer of Portugal's first reported Paleolithic engravings, at nearby Mazouco, even though the doctoral student's mentor, Professor Vitor Oliveira Jorge, had stolen his thunder.⁷ They had given Rebanda a job as their obligatory salvage archaeologist when the new doctor somehow couldn't get a position on a faculty. They had even agreed to keep out "trespassers" so Rebanda could announce his discoveries *himself* this time.⁸

In return, all he'd had to do was wait till *their* concrete curtain had gone up and its reservoir had risen into a sea so voluminous and costly that its drainage would have been unthinkable. Whatever was going to happen to him afterwards in the backwater of Portuguese archaeology had surely been inconsequential, since experience proved that nobody made much fuss over sites that were out-of-sight and out-of-mind - especially with archaeologists beholden to dam-builders and political appointees for access and records. After all, the government had already flooded roughly 40,000 schematic petroglyphs from the Neolithic and Bronze Age, if not before, behind the Fratel dam on the Tagus River – and nobody had complained much or even bothered to publish the drawings.⁹

Rebanda would have had it made! According to the insinuations, he could have continued his documentation right up to the headwaters as his masters worked their way upstream step by step. He could have added to his hoard of exclusive photos and measurements, imposed interpretations, and generally lorded it over his peers - for who could have naysayed him with his treasures locked a hundred meters deep in so many great watery safes?¹⁰ And to think that all the dam-builders' pet archaeologist and his accommodating superiors at the Portuguese Institute for Architectural and Archaeological Heritage (IPPAR)¹¹ in Lisbon - to whom Rebanda had reported his discoveries at least twice¹² - had had to do to pull off this economically patriotic (*not* to say mutually beneficial) stunt was keep their mouths shut!

But, according to the press, the good doctor had *blown* it.

The ingénue had felt it necessary to invite "expert" witnesses to see the engravings - during three short days when the engineers had lowered the river for technical reasons - so the experts could later vouch for Rebanda's postmortems. But what treacherous witnesses! After having suffered at the hands of his mentor, Professor Jorge, why had Rebanda put himself at the mercy of two similar academics and representatives of an international body to boot - Mila Simões de Abreu and her archaeologist husband, Ludwig Jaffe, who represented the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO)? Of course, the stories went, the honorable witnesses had refused to become accomplices and had immediately denounced the whole plot - writing open letters to the Portuguese President, Vice President and Director of IPPAR - with carbon copies for the press.¹³ If only his employers had known that Rebanda was so naive!

My goateed interlocutor smirked as he told me I could try looking for the doctor at the complex built for the previous dam, 15 kilometers downstream. I sensed that this crowd felt their doctor deserved to be the one to tell fellow archaeologists that they might as well ask to visit Atlantis. At least such nuisances would keep him from getting up to more mischief by turning up *new* discoveries.

But I'd hit pay dirt: the fact that I might hear Rebanda's mea culpa was more than I'd hoped for.

Finding the office, however, was easier said than done. Sure enough, there was the 12 year-old Pocinho dam sweeping the valley with a clean curtain.¹⁴ But the silos of this former construction site's cement plant were speckled with rust, the ranks of its offices and dormitories were deserted and almost every window was broken. Still, up in the back, a Land Rover was parked in front of the last functioning barracks.

Sebastian elected to wait outside and embarked on Jules Verne's Journey to the Center of the Earth as I knocked at the locked door. A man leaned into the gloomy foyer, checked me out, and withdrew. But, finally, a secretary answered my summons and let me into a vestibule empty except for a display of postcard-sized photographs of some of the engravings, and a cartoon caricaturing the scandal - which I reckoned had been knowingly posted to co-opt criticism. She announced that it was no use disturbing the doctor, who I could see through a jarred door talking to someone over the phone with peevish vehemence. He just didn't have the authority to let anyone into the valley, she insisted. Only the president of the IPPAR in the capital could do that. When I asked if they could intercede on our behalf, she said *one* had to apply in person, in Lisbon, and have connections.

Still, I complimented her on her English, sympathized with them for having to put up with this hierarchical bother, and kept spinning innocuous questions, while she kept waiting for me to go.

"And how many sites has Dr. Rebanda found *now*?" I asked eagerly.

She glanced downwards: "He can't say. Orders," she mumbled. Poor woman. Finally, I suggested that she didn't need to keep me company while I waited for the good doctor to get off the phone.

So she left me to cool my heels. And Rebanda talked. I couldn't quite make out the man's features through the crack, but it was obvious he was gushing recriminations - and no wonder: the entire archaeological profession had ganged up on the pariah. "He wanted to publish his big discovery after the site had been flooded," an archaeologist at the University of Lisbon, João Zilhão, had charged¹⁵, while one of Rebanda's own expert witnesses, Ludwig Jaffe, had noted that "two years ago, when Rebanda discovered the engravings, the contracts with the construction workers hadn't been signed."¹⁶ Other than me, and, perhaps, the person getting an earful, nobody would talk to the man!

When Rebanda's secretary came out again, to see if she could get either me - or her boss - to give up as the wait grew embarrassingly long, I asked her what the round silos with tipped roofs on the hills had been used for. There was one here in one of the photographs (which I had memorized as a landmark). She struggled for a translation, then returned with a definition - "dovecots". We laughed. The irrelevant exchange had sparked sympathy as we both waited - and *waited*, in similar irrelevance to someone too consumed to give us heed.

Over two hours passed, and still the doctor babbled. Fortunately, Sebastian was becoming ever more engrossed in Verne's book, spelunking towards the planet's core, so I began to gravitate down halls for exercise and companionship, coming to the door of the room where the secretary was braiding the blind's cord while two laconic draftsmen labored over tracings of horses, ibexes and aurochs. We all knew I had crossed a threshold, but, after all, I had paid my dues, and in any case, I padded off to the foyer again.

But the next time, after they had gotten used to my rounds, I stepped inside and admired a sequence of two eight-foot-tall maps full of pins. "Where's the construction site?" I ventured to ask. "Ah, here," she said reluctantly. *That's strange*, I thought as I wandered off again, mulling over a mental photograph of the site distribution.

Something was wrong: in addition to the constellations of pins extending for 17 kilometers upstream from the construction site, there were *dozens* downstream, along the reservoir behind the dam just outside! Surely they were above water, or.... An insidious suspicion began to form....

Finally, so many hours had passed, and she'd informed the doctor so many times that I was still hanging around, that I was forced by the sheer need for new scenery to vary my route, and drifted through empty rooms. Inevitably a document jumped out here, a photograph there. Some particularly graceful creatures labeled "Canada do Inferno" (Hell's Canyon)¹⁷ – the site in the rising dam's shadow that had made all the headlines - bore a footnote: "submerged by the Pocinho Dam". And here were *others*, even closer to the construction site, at "Rêgo de Vide", which had been submerged by the same old dam!

The press accounts about when Rebanda found the first engravings were contradictory. It has been insinuated that Rebanda probably discovered Rock 1 at Canada do Inferno as early as November 1991¹⁸. In Dec. '94, the New York Times reported that "...Rebanda conceded that he had identified the first engravings in 1992 and that he had reported those and subsequent findings to the institute in 1993 and 1994."¹⁹ But the IPPAR was also reported to have sent Rebanda and his team to C  a only in March 1993, after getting the EDP to finance the obligatory archaeological survey²⁰. Finally, IPPAR's president, Nuno Santos Pinheiro, had admitted that he'd visited Hell's Canyon in January '94²¹.

The only thing the reports agreed on was that Rebanda had somehow discovered the flooded portion of Canada do Inferno by the previous autumn²² – asking the EDP to lower the Pocinho reservoir by just 3 meters in November 1994 so he could study the engravings²³. "They told me it was too expensive," Rebanda had told the New York Times. So, quixotically, he had proposed building a dry-dock around the outcropping, and, failing that, underwater exploration. But without the support of his superiors at the IPPAR, where "the people responsible... are architects" who "are not much interested in archeology"²⁴, he got nowhere with the fat cats at the EDP.

So who had shot these photographs, which looked like they had been taken when the sites were dry vegetated hillsides instead of among the muck and bare banks below a fallen waterline? And what about all the pins downriver from the new dam project?

I realized that the photos of the dry sites might have been taken before the Pocinho Dam, which had flooded them, had even been completed – over 12 years before! If so, the power utility may have known of incredibly rich sites years before the first blueprint for the new dam! Yet they'd prattled to the press that they had found the art a year ago, and then more like two years ago, and now, word had it, "only" three years ago²⁵ - when it was always somehow too late to stop the process leading up to construction, which had only started in September '94.²⁶ The gall!

The cover-up may have lasted over a decade!

I discretely videoed these documents and padded off, inwardly quivering.

The draftsmen were calling it quits. I lingered in their room as they departed and the secretary returned to Rebanda's office. Instantly, I whipped out paper and scribbled the fastest copy of the main map that my hand could draw. Still, she caught me; whereupon I went on elaborating it, asking questions, and then padded back to the foyer again to continue my vigil. On guard now, she closed the door.

Then - *lo and behold* - Rebanda hung up. She brought him out: a bearded man in his thirties. He was distracted, agitated, his eyes were a little close together and drained. The man seemed dazed and started to brush me off. I would have to go to Lisbon, and no, it wouldn't do any good for him to fax; he didn't have an iota of authority.

I deplored the usurpation and lent him a sympathetic ear: "I'm being turned into an errand boy," he complained, "passing on and processing requests to enter the valley by hundreds of journalists. I get dozens every day. It's taking up so much time, I can't be an archaeologist any more! My duty is to search for and record more vestiges, but can I? No! So much will go unrecorded because of all this fuss." – So, Rebanda *is resigned* to the inevitability of the flooding, I thought. "That's one of the reasons I was keeping the sites secret until I could publish a comprehensive text to answer the questions - because I anticipated all this interest, and wanted to address it in an efficient manner, to free myself to keep doing my job." I kept nodding. "Now there is no way I can protect the engravings, hundreds of people are going in, the press, villagers, people with clout, some of the engravings have been vandalized already!" I gaped. "I tried to protect them. I even asked Jean Clottes to join our group and help us find a solution."

At the moment, Dr. Clottes was the world's reigning prehistorian – the man who had risen to the pinnacle of the French archaeological establishment and held the only keys to the holy grail of art caves - the unbelievably strong and ancient Grotte Chauvet. After Simões de Abreu and Jaffe had unleashed the scandal by revealing the conspiracy to flood Europe's richest assemblage of open-air Paleolithic art, the IPPAR and Portuguese Ministry of Culture had scrambled to get their own expert witness – and, in a further twist, had asked UNESCO to recommend an expert to challenge the power company's growing efforts to prove the art wasn't Paleolithic but recent²⁷ – in which case, the EDP seemed to think that the public would drop the subject as being the relatively recent work of peasants drawing their cows. After all, the archaeologists and reporters had allowed the Tagus petroglyphs to be drowned with hardly a whimper. Despite all the insinuations about Rebanda and IPPAR, they were actually the first to try blocking the philistines with the clout of an institution as important as UNESCO.

UNESCO had suggested Clottes, who, in an uncanny convergence of good and bad karma, was taken on a whirlwind tour of the tip of the iceberg at Canada do Inferno, then immediately whisked to a press conference in Vila Nova do Foz Côa on Dec 16th, 1994²⁸ – just two days before the discovery of the Chauvet Cave that catapulted him, as its first interpreter and protector, from the summit of the French

archaeological establishment to world fame. After inspecting the 15% of the art that remained above water at the site in the rising dam's shadow, because the EDP had hardly felt it necessary to lower the water for the visit of the foreigner sent by the now antagonistic IPPAR, Clottes stepped before a highly polarized press corps. For all their heightened sensitivity to having Côa's fate evaluated by a foreigner, the Portuguese press viewed Clottes as a referee and expected a verdict.

But Clottes' judgement was mixed, confirming that the art could be dated on stylistic grounds to the early Solutrean or even late Gravettian of twenty to twenty-four thousand years ago while suggesting that flooding the valley might be the best way of protecting it, since Portugal was ill-equipped to protect such widely dispersed panels from vandals!²⁹ "There is no easy solution," he told a reporter. "If the dam is stopped, it means the images will be exposed to the public. They will be difficult to protect, in a remote place, scattered over a wide distance."³⁰ He told another journalist that "There's always the awful possibility of one vengeful lunatic destroying everything with a chisel."³¹ Plus, "If they stop the dam, lots of people will be out of work."³² So what was his solution? – "...if they build the dam, it should be emptied every 10 years to see what is happening."

Portuguese journalists were stunned. The dam-builders and their government backers felt vindicated while much of Portuguese public was crestfallen or furious. Then, as fate would have it, Clottes was back in the headlines within the week, announcing drastic measures to protect France's new crown jewel, Chauvet. Not only did the contrast with his actions in Portugal now smack of a double standard, but there was a piquant irony. About thirty years before, France's equivalent to the EDP had taken the entire Ardeche Gorge, where the Chauvet Cave had just been found, from its entrance at Sauze to a rainbow-huge, natural arch - Vallon Pont d'Arc, next to Chauvet - by eminent domain, to build a dam. If the dam had been built, a dozen known art caves would have been flooded or affected by rising water tables. And France would have lost wonders that now attract 2.5 million visitors a year. Even the Chauvet Cave, which was unknown, might have been threatened by the changing water table! Could Clottes really be unaware of the history of his sacred valley?

The French prehistorian was pilloried. The dam had become a poisonous political issue in a national election with the President and his fellow Socialists attacking the center-right Prime Minister for its willingness to sacrifice both the nation's patrimony and vineyards to a flaky building scheme. Plus there was the money - three hundred million dollars! With stakes this high, both parties unleashed their opinion-making machines, making hash of Clottes' carefully weighed words as quickly as they'd vilified Rebenda.

What wishy-washy nonsense, they howled! As if the owners of villas built around the new lake would really allow it to be drained 100 meters to its bottom - where almost all of the known panels would soon be drowned – once every decade! And as if anyone could even find new art during the two weeks a lake might be emptied (every

hundred years) while everything was coated with algae and grime! Clottes' words may have been earnest, but with stakes this high and politicized they were about as reasonable as Pontius Pilate's attempts to keep the peace.

What the press forgot to emphasize with quite as much fervor was the fact that Clottes had prefaced his Solomonic verdict by saying, "Whatever happens, the engravings must be preserved and not be damaged." Clottes might have felt that he could safely pass the buck because no art conservationist could honestly guarantee the engravings' fate once they were subjected to currents carrying abrasives, burial under the petrifying alluvia that accumulates behind dams³³, and the world's most destructive solvent – water, which would dissolve pigments and destabilize rock that had proven its resistance to aerial conditions over tens of millennia.

While chatting up the gaunt fellow traveller at the construction site, I'd pretended to make small talk by asking engineering questions, including one about the depth of the sediment that had accumulated behind the Pocinho dam. The answer was "3 meters" - in just 12 years! So Clottes was either ignorant or Delphic. I prefer to think the latter, and that his only mistake was thinking that people on both sides were lucid and reflective enough to interpret his verdict correctly.

But I wanted to hear Rebanda's take first-hand: "What did Clottes say?"

"He refused to take a stand," Rebanda answered.

"But why! *What* an honor to have been asked! Plus it was his duty...."

"He didn't want to get involved," Rebanda explained shamefacedly. "There were articles in the press saying he was a French cultural imperialist who thought the Portuguese were just a nation of maids who couldn't make their own cultural decisions. I think the French embassy was telling him not to get caught in the middle."

The irony of it was that Clottes' efforts to be honest without irritating his hosts had been the spark that the French diplomats had dreaded. Suddenly, the Portuguese public felt that the dam-builders were not only destroying the nation's most ancient claim to world grandeur and civilization, but that they were in league with a man who would never have been so cavalier with Paleolithic masterpieces in his own country! Opposition editorialists had a field day with Clottes' apparent hypocrisy and dismissiveness towards Portugal - and demonstrators flooded the streets.

Despite the fact that the great prehistorian's reputation would remain largely intact, and with good reason, in much of the rest of the world³⁴, the Portuguese intelligentsia began to shun him. When I later asked Portuguese archaeologists if they were going to attend an up-coming conference organized by Clottes, they recoiled.

But I can see it both ways. First, because Clottes' retinue of hosts, diplomats and reporters was rushing him and putting him in a bind – even if his stature, pride, and role as UNESCO's expert on rock art had led him into it. Two, because people are often driven to produce their greatest work and worst mistakes by similar drives. And, three, because Clottes was influenced by myths shared by many archaeologists. These conscientious people know that they're barely tolerated by the forces of Mammon - scraping crumbs from the tables of vast enterprises armed with dynamite and bulldozers - and make compacts all the time with them, telling themselves, for instance, that the alluvial strata that cement plants exploit are always too tumbled to contain intact Acheulian hearths. *So why stir up trouble by even looking?*

À propos of Côa, two Portuguese rock art researchers, who couldn't stomach Clottes after his press conference, ironically echoed him by telling me, confidentially, that flooding the engravings could still be a blessing since it would save them from graffiti and those boogymen of archaeologists' dreams, prowling collectors. They even echoed his faith in getting dam operators to regularly empty the vast lake – despite the glaring evidence of the EDP's behavior at Côa itself. I was amazed that they disdained the man while sharing his myths.

If Clottes can be faulted for anything, it might just be for having a selective memory. No sooner had Clottes triggered a public outcry, than he began to explain away his tepid defense of the Côa's importance by saying that he had not been shown enough art to form a true idea of the valley's richness.³⁵ But the truth is, he was shown Rebanda's trove of drawings from submerged sections and sites upstream³⁶ and could have been more demanding.

My guess is that he was so beleaguered by advisers that he was just trying to get out of an awkward situation as quickly, judiciously and diplomatically as possible. After all it was a lot of money, the government was inflexible, the controversy had become a campaign issue – which meant that his advice would seem like foreign meddling - and the elections were still far off. There wasn't even any consensus among international researchers yet! One of the few that I can think of who'd already demanded that the art be saved "... from inundation" was the maverick President of IFRAO, Robert Bednarik, who'd written a scathing indictment of the EDP and IPPAR (while showing sympathy towards Rebanda) as soon as he heard of the danger from Simões in November 1994.³⁷ Even after Clottes left and the IPPAR sought desperately to get an authoritative verdict, this time from an entire jury of experts sent by UNESCO in February, the specialists were cautious, only recommending that the construction be suspended long enough to study the art.³⁸ And that was when they had safety in numbers. So rather than condemn Clottes, perhaps the Portuguese should simply admit his diplomacy opened the debate, even if one might wish that he'd been a crusader.

We all have our failings. Just two weeks before, as Clottes was unveiling Chauvet's wonders to a spellbound audience at Paris's Museum of Man, he'd boasted that "I

couldn't help but feel proud that I had arrived at such a position as to be the first to gaze upon such wonders." It was a mere detail, but, still, that "first" had been a false note – for, in fact, Clottes had been the fourth to enter Chauvet in modern times. No, I decided, Clottes was probably as subject to foibles as the rest of us. For all the boldness of his work and curatorship, Cõa became his tragedy.

I mentioned to Rebenda that I had just attended the lecture on Chauvet, that I even had a videotape of it right there in my camera. If Rebenda wanted to see the frescoes, I offered, I'd be glad to hook it up. "Clottes seemed so consumed by the wonder of his cave," I added, "that he probably feels that he has his hands full." After the lecture, I'd managed to squeeze my way through a throng of admirers long enough to flash a photograph of incisions that Sebastian had found in another cave the same day that Chauvet was being discovered not 50 kilometers away. The great prehistorian dismissed them out of hand. A week later, I'd shown the same picture to Jean Combier, the jovial author of the most comprehensive book on Ardeche prehistory before the Chauvet discovery, and was eagerly invited to his home to discuss the "discovery". From Chauvet's pinnacle, its gatekeeper was probably right to dismiss the scratchings, which I too thought could have been the kneading of bears, but the contrast between the levels of encouragement was striking. I mentioned my controversial photograph to Rebenda.

"And that's just it!" he blurted. "You and Chauvet have the exclusive rights to your photographs: he sold them for fortunes" - in reality, about \$10,000 – "but anyone who sneaks into the valley can sell his: villagers, postcard photographers, other archaeologists, anyone! It's unfair to me as the discoverer: I've never stopped anyone from taking pictures or filming, all I ask that they respect my right to be the first to publish my own discoveries."³⁹ I don't see any difference between Chauvet and myself!"

"Unfortunately, that's the nature of open-air sites," I sympathized, while taking gentle exception. "They're accessible."

So it's true, I thought, *drowning the site was Rebenda's solution to the problem of ownership of photographic rights*. When, in fact, the long-term rights for the cave in France would belong to its Ministry of Culture – which was already attacking its discoverer, Chauvet, for the pittance he'd received for his pictures. Rebenda was even fooling himself on this score, I thought - after all, the Foz Cõa photographs would probably end up belonging to Portugal's own ministry or even the EDP. If the doctor had wanted to make a killing, he'd misplayed his cards. If only he'd announced the discovery, co-opted his employers, and splashed masterpieces across magazine covers while the art's existence was still fresh, he might have won honor, fame, a very small fortune (and maybe even kept his job).

"But you *are* publishing the definitive work, and in the end everyone will refer to that," I ventured.

"Well, - yes." Rebanda seemed uncertain, as if he had abandoned the idea.

"Then I would be honored if I could order a copy now - and pay for it in advance -"

"Oh, it's too early for that."

"Then I'd be grateful if you'd take my address and put me on the waiting list."

"The waiting list? Yes, well, I'll send you one." He led me off to take my name. "Can you stay till Monday?" he suddenly warmed up, "because there will be a tour - without me - in conjunction with the international conference on Foz Côa which Professor Jorge is holding in Porto this weekend."

The same ubiquitous professor? "But why aren't *you* speaking and leading the tour?" I asked ingenuously, while apologizing for our bad timing.

"It's the third conference on Foz Côa and I haven't been invited to any of them," he grimaced. I couldn't help but feel sorry for the pariah. Scientists - like lawyers - ply an adversarial trade, but the chance to put Portugal into the archaeological heavens – and to boost their own reputations with it - had given many researchers more ulterior motives than usual. Their meetings were becoming righteous feeding frenzies. Within weeks, local academics had begun signing their names to Rebanda's discoveries, tracing, and interpretations while forgetting to cite him. Although they granted him the discovery of Hell's Canyon (in footnotes), other sites that Rebanda had already noted were soon claimed by competitors as Rebanda was effectively silenced.

"But you're Portugal's expert on the Upper Paleolithic!" I cried indignantly. "You discovered Mazouco and...."

"No, I discovered these engravings at Foz Côa, but there were country people who knew about the ones at Mazouco and associated them with witchcraft; I just learned of them while I was researching my doctorate. Naturally, I told my mentor, Jorge, but he wouldn't wait for me to publish my thesis, and had to publish the discovery himself."

"But didn't he give you credit?"

"Of course, in a footnote, in which he didn't even differentiate me from the superstitious peasants. This upper-class professor and that upper-class professor gave papers based on my research, but after I earned my degree I couldn't get a job on a faculty. All the positions were reserved for candidates from "good" families - not a country boy like myself. So, I had to take a job as a salvage archaeologist, and can't even give papers at the universities, since the professors think of us as technicians."

Those to whom evil is done may do it in return, I thought. But I could hardly hold my tongue: why on earth had he invited people from this caste of academics back into his life - and the valley - when at least one of them had apparently abused him? "And now they are spreading these calumnies against me," he continued. "Saying I wanted to destroy my own discoveries - when I invited three colleagues, including Mila Simões and Jaffe, to come help me save them. Then one of them called Vitor. And Vitor and his wife, Susana" - was it my imagination or did her name stick in his craw? - "came too. And I pleaded with them all to help me save the engravings. They're telling lies, LIES about what I said. Do you think I'm such a fool as to invite the man who deprived me of the credit for my first discovery, to come see my greatest wonders if it wasn't because I needed all the allies I could get; if it wasn't because I even needed the universities to help save them. It's CRAZY!"

I was dumb-founded: could this be another case of scientists using the press with its short attention span and superficiality to smear a colleague and co-opt his discoveries?⁴⁰ According to Simões, she and Jaffe had received a panicked call from Rebanda "in the middle of the night... shouting that I should come quickly, that there was rock art that would soon be inundated." A brief drop in the reservoir behind the Pocinho dam caused by Spanish dams upstream and work at Pocinho had provided a few days to see art that was usually submerged, before it disappeared forever, as the water began rising inexorably within the next few days behind both the old and new dams - until even the few engravings that remained above the Pocinho reservoir were gone by August 1995.⁴¹ When they drove to the valley the next day - Nov. 8, 1994 - because Rebanda "sounded so worried" - what they "saw was amazing, magnificent." But Rebanda wanted them to become accomplices! "He said he would publish a thesis and a book, but by then the images would be covered by water so he needed (us) to authenticate them." Simões claimed that she demanded that the discovery be announced "because the Portuguese people must decide if they want a dam there or not." But "Rebanda made a scene. He started shouting. He even threw his hat on the ground and jumped on it. He said he wanted nobody to know, that he wanted to keep all this for his book."⁴² He became so agitated that he even "...made a series of threats."⁴³

Wow! Maybe her words had been distorted by a translation, but that double reference to "shouting", the call to patriotism, the insistence about Rebanda's manic jumping on his own hat, and Rebanda's failure to pre-empt them once he knew their intentions all made me as uneasy as an interrogator picking up a suspect's tells. Something about the scenario seemed too pat.

But what if Simões and Jaffe had mollified Rebanda by saying something like: "Yes, yes, we must act in concert; give us a few days to get back to you with a plan," and then hiked out with Rebanda as partners - only to pull the rug from under the upstart by presenting the portrait she had painted for the international press of the EDP hireling stomping around the campfire screaming betrayal? The picture was

compelling: Simões and her husband angelically insisting that the world must be told, while the hireling screamed demonically over the fire, accusing university archaeologists of trying to hog the credit yet again.

But was it plausible? If Rebanda had known Simões and Jaffe were going to paint him into a corner, wouldn't he have raced for the exit? Personally, I couldn't see anybody bedding down for the night and traipsing out the next morning with people who had announced that they were going to expose him. In Rebanda's place, I'd have calmed down and let the traitors fall to sleep, *but then* I'd have snuck away - trekking fast through the dark, picking myself up when I fell, but getting out - bloody knees and all - and calling that alarm *first!* I'd have been the one to announce the existence of the largest gathering of open-air Paleolithic engravings in Europe to the world. And saved myself by taking the glory.

But then, what about Rebanda's self-serving talk of photo credits, not to mention the engravings already submerged by the dam at the doorstep – and his belief that the engravings were doomed to be flooded?

Strangely enough, I could again see it being both ways, since the roots of tragedy are self-deception and entwined motives. Both Rebanda and Simões de Abreu could have been traitors and saviors at once, and as long as I was with this archaeologist, I felt bound to encourage the savior in him. In essence, my heart – if not my mind - had taken his side for the moment; he was the underdog, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and I was concerned that he might even attempt suicide. Furthermore, I had no doubt - whatever pacts he'd struck - that he would make up for them if only approached constructively. After all, he'd certainly proved himself to be the best Paleolithic art prospector in the country – if not the Iberian Peninsula!⁴⁴

But perhaps he wasn't the only gullible one.

He must have realized that I was rooting for him to pull himself out of his tailspin, because suddenly he decided. "I'm going to call the president of the Institute. Maybe I can get you the approval."

Rebanda was back on the phone in a minute, this time wheedling and wrangling. I could see he was really having to push. Finally, he hung up; they needed a petition giving my credentials and motives. After we'd faxed it, I was sorry to see him having to still recall and refax, as he nudged the request repeatedly through the unyielding bureaucracy.

But, finally, the word came: they were going to let us into just one of the guarded sites. It must have seemed like an insult to him after all his efforts, so with an anarchic gesture, he announced, what the hell, he'd photocopy their fax when it came, so we could enter a second. If I didn't mind coming back at 9 the next morning, he apologized, the approval should be there. Poor man, I thought, he really is bound

to their rack. As we parted, I invited him - for what it was worth - to come rest up with us in Paris, sorry that I would almost certainly have to "betray" a man who had ended up doing the right thing.

- TO DAM OR PRESERVE - IN DOLLARS AND SENSE -

Upon leaving, Sebastian asked to check out the Pocinho dam, so I drove round an interchange into an empty parking lot with planters. Huge black derricks hulked atop the dam beside a row of gate-lifting pistons that looked like Big Berthas. But basically the dam was a streamlined machine without much need for local intervention or maintenance. Except for another of the ubiquitous "Securitas" guards advancing out of the dark entrance, there was nobody in sight.

We waved that we were just lost, and headed back to buy groceries.

As I was waiting in the checkout line, I fell into conversation with the grocer. "But are they real?" he asked, when I explained that we had come to study the engravings, "How can you tell they aren't recent?" he insisted, hoping against hope that I'd make a hard choice evaporate. My unequivocal certification of their global importance only made him uneasier, as he didn't know whether to feel flattered or upset. "But what do you think we should do then?" he pleaded. I started off gingerly, seeing the situation from both sides like Clottes, and he announced that, when it came down to it, he was for the dam because its "employees will buy my groceries."

"Well, then," I answered, "look at it in terms of economics. There are four levels; the national level and local one. Then the present one, which will last 3, maybe 4 years, and, finally, the long-term one – the one you'll be left with. The dam may seem like an asset at the national level - since it'll provide a little electricity and water for cities along the coast. But the Port producers are against it and your ex-Secretary of State for Energy, Nuno Ribeiro da Silva, says the dam isn't even necessary for electricity.⁴⁵ So the real question is: 'Will the dam help you in Foz Côa?' You will lose 900 hectares that are perfect for vineyards⁴⁶ but there are the jobs. The construction project provides somewhere between 600 and 2000.⁴⁷ But a manager at the construction site told me that less than 20 of those workers come from here – the rest move from one EDP project to the next one. So let's look at how many local jobs the dam will create after it's finished. How many jobs did the Pocinho Dam create? It's remote-controlled from someplace like Lisbon, so, my guess is twenty, twenty-five?"

"Perhaps," he grimaced worriedly.

"And how many jobs would be created almost immediately if you had a tourist industry? There would be guards, guides, museum curators, tour boat crews, hotel staffs, restaurant personnel, souvenir dealers, outfitters for rafting trips, even grocers! In fact, one of your biggest customers today is a tourist. My guess is you'd get at least 300 long-term *local* jobs without even being creative. And if you were! Maybe

thousands! It's not every day that people get to see a partly built dam, with all its entrails, with no water behind it – and the continent's biggest outdoor gallery of Paleolithic art. The unfinished dam would be the world's largest land sculpture, a surreal and symbolic tourist attraction in itself. Plus (now I'm just brainstorming) one side could be the biggest movie screen on earth - for film festivals and sound-and-light shows at night. And the other side - why not make it the biggest mural - in homage to our ancestors' breakthrough? When you think about it, you have so much potential here, that you need an airport; not a hydro-electric plant."

"But I'm just worried that the mayor wouldn't know how to encourage all this tourism," he pleaded.

"Then, *you* would just have to show him. By the way, do you sell can openers?"

"No, but you can have mine!" he cried, relieved, and, over my protests, raced to fetch it.

- THE VALE DE FIGUEIRA -

As the sun slanted over the plateau into the wilderness of the Côa valley, I decided to sneak into a side-valley to the north of our campsite that Rebanda's map had cluttered with pins. A trickle wound down the ravine under red-brown slabs and terraced orchards. We peered into a dovecot, a squat white tower lined inside with empty compartments like a city after a plague. Sebastian and I scrambled and tacked among the carious cliffs, till there was nothing left but rock overhanging the water itself. Slate slabs, thoughtfully laid into a wall as steps, led down through a canopy of fig trees into a cavernous wallow between cliffs. The place was as much a trap as a shelter. In fact, paw prints indicated that we had missed cornering another feral dog or fox in its lair.

Then, after breaching a wall of rushes, we broke to the reservoir's edge - and were met by a horned skull stuck on a stake. We bagged the warning or omen, caught and released a giant water beetle - the kind that injects deliquescent enzymes into living frogs, then sucks out their juice - and worked our way along what was actually the upper tier of a disappearing cliff. Suddenly, a deeply hammered auroch on the rock stood out boldly as a road sign - alerting us to an entire herd. But a huge horse, leaning over the depths, was both more graceful and cryptic, for someone had wedged a rusty horseshoe into a crack between its hooves. *That* makes a strange but appropriate step, I thought, before recognizing it as a talisman.

Suddenly, I remembered what Rebanda had said about the engravings' association with witchcraft. Repeating what Rebanda must have told her just a day or two before her interview, Simões had said much the same thing in her call-to-arms, without citing him: "People of the region knew about the pictures. They treated Hell's Canyon" – a few hundred yards downstream from this spot – "as a magic place. They said the old

people always told them that those rocks were inhabited by spirits. That children should not go there or touch anything."⁴⁸ I couldn't help but wonder as to the import of the horned skull and horseshoe: "What if I'm breaking someone's spell?" I worried. "In fact," I wondered irrationally, "could these fetishes be all that's holding the water **back?**"



And again I thought of magic.

The Vale de Cabroes just below Vila Nova de Foz Côa. When art panels are located in the Côa's side valleys, they are apparently concentrated on northern slopes. The geology, erosion, & silica skins protecting engravings all seem similar on both slopes, so I theorize that this positioning is not simply a taphonomic illusion created by the disappearance of engravings on the southern slopes.

That night we baited up. I was a willing guide as we skewered corn kernels on hooks, lashed lines around a log and threw the lethal leashes into the dark. I wasn't expecting anything when I ambled down at dawn, but there it was: a big mound under the bank! I hauled in, imagining a carp. But

was dismayed to land a huge turtle. The wounded creature cringed, sucking its neck deep into its chamber in an "S". Surgically, it was a nightmare: I'd have to pry its head out, keep its neck extended, wedge open its powerful beak and finally thrust the treble barbs *down* its throat, so as to carefully extract their burr, without snagging them again! And I didn't even have a strand of wire, let alone alligator pliers. Either I'd have to find tools, make them or dispatch the creature with a blow.

Being obstinate (or perhaps because of the prehistoric setting), I started whittling stone, knapping a microlithic surgeon's kit, and then bent single-mindedly to my task - failing till I was disgusted with myself and worried for my victim (*which I had bizarrely associated with Rebanda*). And then, I saw the light. I needed a specialized fork to straighten the tongs. No sooner had I chipped the thin device and steadily shoved each curve straight, than the hook slipped smoothly free. I woke Sebastian in time to see the beast lumber over the bank and glide away, and then it was high time we checked out our other line at the doctor's office.

Of course, having to surreptitiously come out of the valley's depths, we were late. But neither Rebanda nor the fax had arrived. From what I could tell, even his draftsmen had decided to take the day off⁴⁹, once they realized the coast was clear. Only Rebanda's long-suffering secretary had to keep her post and occupied herself by taking up the relay of calling and faxing. Noon passed as we still waited together like an old couple, talking about the doctor's misery, Australian rock art, translations; whatever. Soon, the authorities in Lisbon were going to leave for lunch and siestas. It was now or never, so she made a flurry of calls, and - hallelujah - the fax churned out that rarest of documents, an approval signed by the gatekeeper himself!

This time there were two guards behind an overhanging military fence crested by barbed wire. They were a hundred yards apart, making perpetual rounds as they kept time clocks happy by cranking them every few paces with keys chained to the fence. And what time clocks! These red and gray devices were not only customized to match the guards' uniforms, but showed off the latest in high-tech materials and molding. The guards stiffened as Sebastian and I had the gumption to breach a forbidden zone and stride blithely forward. They took the paper warily through the grill and peered at it in some wonder. Finally, they agreed that one of them would walk parallel to us, down the fence-line, to let us in the distant gate.

The guard who beckoned us in was rearing a guard-dog puppy, which scampered around, tumbling over ledges and using its chin to lever itself over steps. We patted it: still so roly-poly, although it would soon be prowling the perimeter. Even the guard wanted to keep his innocence, taking the refreshing break to be our guide. As we wound our way down towards the reservoir among towering red cliffs, he took quiet pride in pointing out the hidden elements of scattered engravings. When we reached the water, though, he hesitated... hesitated before announcing that 24 of the finest works were already submerged at our *feet*.

For this was Hell's Canyon – the site that Clottes had been rushed through.

A Securitas guard and his dog protecting engravings in the Côa Valley 15 years after this article was written.

Our guide was a decent young man who couldn't help feeling uneasy blocking access to these bold masterpieces at the source of all our arts. It was probably his first job after military service, but he was intelligent enough to realize that he'd been





hired as a pawn in a vast conspiracy to keep Portugal's greatest cultural wonders out of sight and out of mind, till they could be obliterated. For a recent young patriot, it couldn't help but sit the wrong way. "They only lowered the water once," he confided, "and that was when President Soares himself came after he announced that he was for protecting the engravings. As soon as he was gone, they brought the level right back up." "Didn't they even lower it for Clottes?" I asked, wanting to hear his answer.

One of the many panels with proto-Solutrean, pecked outlines of animals at Canada do Inferno, Foz Côa.

It was in his eyes. "No," he said firmly and I realized that such powerlessness on high in the face of Portugal's true powers was oddly consoling for a young man in his position.

"Well," I persevered, "someone must have come to study how to remove the engravings at least? I mean, this is a slate mining region: there must be plenty of people right in Foz Côa who could remove the slabs for a museum."

"Them, they'd have no idea!" he looked as if I'd suggested that village idiots could have painted the Sistine Chapel. "The constructors did a study: it can't be done. The engravings would *break*!"

"Come on," I burst out before I could think better of it, "haven't they ever heard of *glue*?" It was bad enough that these dammers were drowning the finest combination of scenery and open-air Paleolithic art in Europe, I thought, so they don't have to compound their crime by spreading misinformation - this, this *balderdash* even about the chance of salvaging it! Here they could move mountains and they *dared* tell people no one could save the art! Why, moving these small panels would be child's play by comparison to saving Abu Simbel in the early Sixties.⁵⁰ In fact, if the dam-builders insisted on flooding the valley and making any salvage effort revenue-generated, they could even crassly put 1/10th of the panels up for auction at

Sotheby's - and make a profit! But, oh, no! Everything would have to be lost to the world forever. Their stingy hypocrisy and philistinism revolted me: they wouldn't spend a penny on protecting such discoveries, but they'd drown the world up to its headwaters to keep driving Mercedes.

It dawned on me why they wanted us to swallow such lies. One, because any plan to remove the friezes not only meant assigning a value to them, but keeping the controversy alive. And if the slabs were ever housed in some "museum" like teeth yanked from nature's face, they'd be a perpetual affront to the dammers' achievement. As a screenwriter, I began to wonder just how far they'd go....

But as a devoted conservator, I wondered how far I should go.... For I knew that if it weren't so noisy and there weren't the risk of being thrown in prison by these "protectors", I myself could have extracted the smaller sculptures without losing a crumb - and with nothing more than dedication and a rock hammer. By God, I thought, if the flooders don't save them, I hope the townspeople storm the valley!

- THE PILGRIMS -

And sure enough, at the next site, they seemed to be doing just that. The mountainous dirt road forked, meandered and even skirted an imposing castle⁵¹, but several classes of children were making the long dusty pilgrimage on foot while carloads of adults in their Sunday best made the excursion to see the only engravings to have escaped the censors - either because the site at Penascosa was so far from Lima Montiero's spyglass or because the valley was gentler here and had always been farmed. If the guards hadn't been under strict orders not to sell admissions, they'd have made a killing; but then any financial association with the art is anathema to the dammers: the next thing they knew, they'd have a revolt on their hands!

*A stag with huge antlers formed by scraping.
Penascosa, Castelo Melhor.*

Still, these guards were actually tame as the locals poured down to catch a glimpse of the animals through the fence. This time our escort gave us the same detailed explanations, but was more practiced. And like the first guard, when he realized that I had somehow gotten



authorization despite my evident opposition to the reservoir, he let out his pent-up indignation - for we were insiders.

"Come with me," he summoned us, leaving his time-clock with his colleague and leading us out of the enclosure; "You see the summit of that big hill, that's how high the water will be; And over there - come, come - this is a Roman road," - and what a road! - still usable and entirely composed of megalithic slabs - "and here, look at this inscription, it's Phoenician; and here, see these carved chambers in the riverbed, they are the remains of a medieval mill. *But upstream*," we were already more than 6 kilometers from the dam site, "*10 kilometers from here, at Faia, there are paintings of animals – not engravings - in granite, not slate, and the walls are so steep that only climbers have seen them. When the water rises, everything to Faia will be gone.*" The young man might as well have grabbed my arm and pleaded: "Please, PLEASE, sound the alarm!"

After he'd hastened to take up his time-clock again, I wandered if there might not be even more testimonials of man's attraction to this classical Eden with its islets and fords in the flowery river, and browsed through a plowed orchard, along a contour which I judged would have been the valley floor half a million years ago. I hadn't passed the first olive tree when I happened upon a well-knapped hand-axe, and then another! So this, our *entire* past, was the price of such "clean" power! I may be quixotic, but I'll choose windmills over this destruction any day!

We knew the next dawn would be our last, so we broke camp in blue light to explore the teeming side-valley beyond the first auroch. According to Rebanda's wall maps, something lay just around the first bend. As we passed the threshold between the deadened depths and virgin current with its billowing water-foliage, we had to skirt and climb over a sheer wall blocking the side-valley's entrance. But then Piscos Brook ran between trees, pastures and cane-groves, with cliffs full of shelters and stone panels at each bend. There were so many warblers piping and whistling, there must have been a dozen species with overlapping territories. Goldfinches sparked into the air, a crested hoopoe flashed orange and black, and the shaggy canes were a tumult of avian chatter. At our feet, frogs skipped like pebbles and painted turtles rowed earnestly in tangled water blossoms - all for the taking. But we had no intention of disturbing any more beasts and scouted the first rocks. Nothing, nothing....

Then, telltale lines.... Bellies, rumps, backs, *heads*: horses nuzzling! The intertwined couple, spanning the length of a single real horse, was still necking in Eden after twenty millennia. With the flood rising up the slope their affection seemed so poignant. How dare the dammers condemn this couple? I despaired, unless enough of us care. Unless you and I and all of us together add our voices to those of the Portuguese citizenry trekking down for a last look, and reclaim what is OURS!

Not Portugal's - *OURS* - because this art is so old, despite its elegance, that we share the blood and genius of those distant ancestors who awoke to the universe, whether our cavalcade of ancestors migrated around the Old World or came across the Bering Straits 14,000 years ago. This art is *ours*, just as it is Rebanda's and Jorge's, so I implore you; please, take a moment now to lay *your* claim to *your* heritage and your genius and write your heart out to:

His Excellency, President Mario Soares
c/o Professor Vitor Oliveira Jorge
Instituto de Arqueologia
facultad de Letras
rua Campo Alegre 1055
4100 Porto, Portugal

and, *if* you would like to reinforce your point, to our other protagonist:

Dr. Nelson Rebanda
Largo de Corredoura
5160 Moncorvo, Portugal

Tell them:

"I want to add my voice to yours and save one of the ancestral homes and glories of our species - MY HOME AND YOURS at Foz Côa!"

Côa & Paris, May 1995

For further information on how you can help, please contact:

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A pecked stag looking over its shoulder. Vale de Cabroes, Foz Côa



COMBINED PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR:

- the original 1995 article, “*Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Conspiracy to Flood the Seventh Wonder of Prehistory*”
- and “*Drama on the Coa: A Bold New Museum & Retrospective on the Fiercest Archaeological Feud of Modern Times*”

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<http://www.rupestre.net/tracce/zilrep2.html>

***Footnotes have been added to the internet version of the article to provide historical perspective and more detail about sources than the versions that were published & distributed in 1995. A list of several hundred of the people who signed the petition that Prehistoric Art Emergency sent to the Portuguese government, before the dam was stopped, can be seen on-line at:
http://www.duncancaldwell.com/Site/Saving_Rock_Art.html***

¹ The three discoverers of the Chauvet Cave were Eliette Brunel Deschamps, Christian Hillaire, and Jean-Marie Chauvet. While Chauvet's name was given to the cave itself, the names of his co-discoverers were given to two of its large chambers.

² The IPPAR announced the existence of the valley's engravings on November 19, 1994 but a video was made of them in 1993. Bahn 1995, pp. 2.

³ Clottes 1995.

⁴ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 267

⁵ Electricidade de Portugal

⁶ Ribeira de Piscos / Quinta dos Poios, Muxagata

⁷ Bednarik 1994; Simons in the New York Times 1994.

⁸ Bednarik 1994

⁹ Jorge 1995. pp. 29-31

¹⁰ Bahn 1995 for a re-capitulation of the same accusations against the IPPAR & Rebanda.

¹¹ IPPAR stands for the Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico

¹² Harrington. Art News. March 1995

¹³ Dr. Mila Simões de Abreu and Ludwig Jaffe were the founders of the APAAR (Associação Portuguesa de Arte e Arqueologia Rupestre), which has been a member of IFRAO (International Federation of Rock Art Organisations) since Sept. 1992. Dr. Simões was its chairperson. Jaffe was also the IFRAO representative of the Società Cooperativa Archeologica, Le Orme dell'Uomo, Italy (Bednarik 1994). The story of the denunciation is from Bednarik (1994) and Simons in the New York Times (1994).

¹⁴ Bahn 1995, p. 2

¹⁵ Quoted by Harrington. Art News. March 1995

¹⁶ Quoted by Harrington. Art News. March 1995

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- ¹⁷ Canada do Inferno, Vila Nova de Foz Côa
- ¹⁸ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 263
- ¹⁹ Simons in the New York Times 1994.
- ²⁰ Bahn 1995, pp. 2
- ²¹ Simons in the New York Times 1994.
- ²² Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 264
- ²³ Bahn 1995, pp. 2 (3 meters) with Simons in the New York Times 1994 concerning lowering the reservoir.
- ²⁴ Simons in the New York Times 1994.
- ²⁵ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 263
- ²⁶ Bahn 1995, p. 2
- ²⁷ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 264
- ²⁸ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 264
- ²⁹ “...his (Clottes’) *conclusions pointed to the study of the engravings prior to their submersion since he stated that the engravings would be better conserved under water, because the Portuguese authorities would not be able to cope with the actions of vandalism. This view, revealed in a press conference in Foz Côa on 16 December 1994, aroused great indignation in the Portuguese media and, consequently, in national public opinion.*” Baptista & Fernandes. 2007. p. 264
- ³⁰ Simons in the New York Times 1994.
- ³¹ Quoted by Harrington. Art News. March 1995
- ³² Harrington. Art News. March 1995
- ³³ Bednarik & Jaffe have been the most outspoken spokesmen about delusions concerning the protective qualities of reservoirs – which not only inundate art panels with water but deep alluvial deposits that make their later recovery dangerous and impractical. In an on-line commentary, Jaffe denounced what he perceived as a continuation of the scandal under new management: “In December 1994 IPPAR passed the responsibility for the rock art in the Coa valley to Mario Varela Gomes and Antonio Martinho Baptista. Gomes’ first public statement in January 1995 was to advocate the submersion of the rock art.... When Abreu called for an international commission to consider the finds, Gomes voiced opposition to involving foreigners.... Both” - Baptista and Gomes – “were closely involved in the rationale to submerge the rock art (to ‘protect it from vandals’); in fact, on 8 November *Baptista spoke of how sedimentation behind dams should protect rock art*” - my italics. “During Clottes’ December 1994 visit Gomes helped convince him to favour the submersion of the sites (in view of the vandalism of the Mazouco horse, angry dam workers and locals, etc.). The truth is that the worst damage the Mazouco figures suffered occurred when Gomes himself enhanced them... ” (Jaffe). Later, Bednarik spear-headed another campaign to save a Portuguese rock-art assemblage from inundation – this time behind a dam in the Guadiana Valley - and noted that “None of this helps the rock art of the Guadiana, *condemned to inundation under billions of tonnes of lake sediment as the reservoir silts up over the next 70 years*” – again, my italics. (See Bednarik, <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/guadiana/web/index.html>)

³⁴ Interestingly, a few years after this appeal was written, Clottes came under fierce attack and even ridicule by many representatives of the French intelligentsia, including some of the country's most prominent prehistorians, after he and David Lewis-Williams published "The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and magic in the painted caves" in 1996. Their critics often subscribe to the doctrine that modern ethnographic evidence cannot be used to interpret ancient cultures. Although it is true that one must be extremely circumspect about doing so, such evidence often opens new perspectives that have more in common with the subsistence systems of ancient cultures than does our own, and the two authors showed considerable originality and courage in exploring it.

³⁵ Clottes 1998 b.

³⁶ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 264

³⁷ Bednarik 1994. Although Bednarik was one of the earliest crusaders for Côa - *calling for the EDP to stop building the dam in Nov. 1994* - most Portuguese archaeologists with access to the Côa sites now shun him as thoroughly as they do Clottes and Rebanda. What happened is that the Portuguese government decided "...to arrange a series of blind tests to establish the antiquity of the rock-art" after consulting with Clottes in his capacity as UNESCO's main adviser on rock art (Bednarik 1995). After our departure, Bednarik and three other researchers (Alan Watchman from Canada, plus Fred Phillips and Ronald Dorn from the USA), who believed that they had found ways to date rock art directly, studied some of the Côa's engravings during separate visits. But not before signing controversial non-disclosure agreements with the EDP, which was hoping that their techniques would yield dates so recent that they could be used to ridicule stylistic daters who had identified the engravings as Paleolithic (Baptista & Fernandes 2007, p. 266). Unfortunately, Bednarik, who is one of the world's most encyclopedically informed, accomplished, and bold prehistorians, walked right into the trap. Somewhat like Clottes. And like Clottes, perhaps he should have foreseen the dangers. First, because his dating system, which was based on determining the degree of micro-erosion undergone by a rock face, had been developed in Australia, where climate and geological conditions are different from Portugal's. But even more importantly, because it had not been independently proven or calibrated for Côa – and would turn out to be wrong there both for reasons laid out by João Zilhão (1995 a & b; 1997) and because excavations within a few hundred meters of our campsite at Fariseu eventually found engravings *in situ* under thousands of years of Paleolithic deposits, exactly where the stylistic experts had predicted they should be (Aubry & Baptista 2000; Aubry & Sampaio, 2008). Sadly, Bednarik and Watchman also opened themselves up to charges of complicity by simultaneously doubting that the engravings were as old as stylistic daters believed, showing apparent bias, and writing a letter to the Board of Directors of the EDP on March 24, 1995 in which they offered their services as dating experts and stated that "*if the art were to be shown to be Post-Palaeolithic,*" - by their methods – "*its importance would diminish dramatically and the controversy concerning its preservation would be largely resolved*" (Zilhão at: <http://www.rupestre.net/tracce/zilrep2.html>). This odd statement flies in the face of

Bednarik's consistent defense of both the Côa's art and other assemblages, suggesting that it was a ploy to get the EDP to allow them to test their methods. Even though both men concluded that their observations proved that the art was no older than the Neolithic, Bednarik did not repeat the notion, when announcing his results, that a relatively recent vintage diminished the art's importance or the need to protect it – quite the contrary. All the same, he had made himself vulnerable to blistering attacks.

As soon as their results indicating that the art might be only 3,000 to 6,500 years old (if not even younger) were announced – *which actually made the engravings even more astonishing, potentially rewriting the history of rock art or even making Portugal the last bastion of the Paleolithic tradition* – the most important Portuguese right-wing weekly screamed that the direct-dating results proved that stylistic daters like Clottes had perpetrated a “*FRAUD*” (O Independente, 7 July 1995). The leftist press and Portuguese archaeological milieu reacted with just as much reflection, ignoring both Bednarik's qualifiers and his pioneering role in organizing the world campaign to fight for the whole valley's salvation (see Dossier Côa p. 539, for a resolution, written in defense of Côa, by Bednarik, in a book filled with vitriole against him). In the same book, which Jorge compiled to record the campaign he was spear-heading to save Côa – a laudatory effort, if there ever was one, that made Jorge synonymous with yet another of Rebanda's finds - Bednarik is repeatedly dismissed as a “*charlatan*” (pp. 423-426). “*The authors of these essays,*” Jorge writes, referring to Bednarik and his three colleagues, “*are not prehistorians*” (p. 459). Jorge's utter dismissal of Bednarik was clearly motivated by the latter's implicit condemnation of the way that Jorge had appropriated Rebanda's earlier discovery at Mazouco, instigating Rebanda's secrecy that was one component of the Côa “cover-up” (Bednarik 1994, p. 152). Ironically, the mandarin in Porto would come out smelling like roses for his campaign while the roles of several well-meaning prehistorians, if I may insist upon the word, were simplified so as to make them better scapegoats.

It should also be noted that the individuals who participated in the debate were often somewhat unwittingly drawn into playing secondary or tertiary roles in a struggle between the Portuguese Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Industry. Thus, rather typically, “Dorn's (1995) table of minimum ages” and “Watchman's ‘Executive Summary’” were both “...given to the press by the office of the Minister for Industry” (Zilhão 1995 a pp. 884-885) in support of the EDP.

Finally, in an epilogue to the direct-dating tempest at Côa, one of the four direct daters, Professor Dorn, published a short paper entitled “A change of perception” in *La Pintura* in which he retracted his attempts to date art because he had “...made two critical mistakes on the radiocarbon dating of organic matter associated with rock varnish” (Dorn 1996). Dorn further concluded “...that the technique was not working and that the Côa engravings might be truly Paleolithic, 18,000 or more years in age” (Whitley & Simon 2002, referring to Dorn 1997).

Then, in 1999, a second of the Côa direct daters, Alan Watchman, also made an “...unqualified retraction of AMS varnish dating... at the annual Society for American Archaeology meetings in Chicago” that was witnessed by David Whitley, Marvin

Rowe and Lawrence Loendorf (Whitley & Simon 2002). These retractions confirmed that some of Zilhão's criticisms of the direct dating attempts were well founded, but don't necessarily reflect on other matters raised in his disputes with Bednarik and Jaffe.

³⁸ Baptista & Fernandes 2007. p. 265. In addition to hosting the UNESCO delegation in Feb. 1995 that was led by Mounir Bouchenaki, the IPPAR formed a scientific committee consisting of Antonio Beltrán, Emmanuel Anati and Jean Clottes, who came back for a second round. The committee met in Portugal just once, in May 1995.

³⁹ Rebanda is quoted as making a similar statement in the Dec. 27, 1994 New York Times.

⁴⁰ In November 1995 - six months after this call-to-arms was published and circulated to Prehistoric Art Emergency's volunteers (who I'm glad to report included a young actor, Yann Montelle, who went on to earn a doctorate in prehistory) - a book edited by Jorge called "Dossier Côa" appeared with 20 contributions by him or his wife. Of the 66 contributions written by individuals, not one is by Nelson Rebanda, whose ghost - to anyone interested in intellectual property - haunts every line. In the English sections, Jorge generously credits numerous associates and generations of Portuguese prehistorians by full name, while studiously avoiding any mention of Rebanda except where it is unavoidable, and then only with his last name between brackets.

⁴¹ Bahn 1995, pp. 2

⁴² All quotes in the paragraph are from the Dec. 27, 1994 New York Times. The year after this article was written, another feud broke out - this time between a duo and a trio: Ludwig Jaffe & Mila Simões de Abreu, on the one hand, and João Zilhão, António Martinho Baptista, and António Pedra Batarda Fernandes, on the other. Jaffe accused the trio, who had taken over responsibility for the archaeological resources of the valley, of endangering art panels and refusing to allow qualified foreign researchers or even Dr. Simões de Abreu herself to enter such sites as Penascosa. His demand for their dismissals is posted on-line at: <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/guadiana/web/coa.html>

⁴³ Bednarik 1994. p. 151.

⁴⁴ After writing this article in May 1995, it occurred to me that I might have missed one of the main reasons for eliminating Rebanda from Portugal's archaeological milieu - the fact that he was so effective at finding rock art that drew international attention, first to Mazouco, then to Côa. After the Côa scandal served its purpose as an electoral issue that helped the Socialists to win power, the new government kept its campaign promise by protecting the Côa Valley but used the goodwill engendered by the decision to blunt criticism while flooding other huge assemblages of rock art. The IFRAO has been particularly vocal in denouncing what it perceives as the replacement of one set of compliant archaeologists (the IPPAR & Rebanda) by another (two new agencies called the IPA and CNART, and Zilhão, Baptista & Fernandes). Whatever the case may be, the problem of rock art conservation is still as far from resolution in Portugal as it is in most other places in the world. Most

archaeologists work for the parts of governments with the least clout – their Ministries of Culture - and live with constant reminders as to how far their efforts to stand up to more powerful ministries, like Ministries of Industry or Mines, will be tolerated.

⁴⁵ Bahn 1995, pp. 3

⁴⁶ Bahn 1995, pp. 3; Catherine Vincent, writing in *Le Monde* on March 11, 1995, goes into much more detail about one particular vineyard, Ervamoira, that would have been lost, along with its exceptional Port wine.

⁴⁷ Bahn 1995, pp. 3, cites 600 jobs; Simons in the *New York Times*, 1994, cites 2000.

⁴⁸ Quoted by Simons in the *New York Times* 1994.

⁴⁹ When I wrote the article, I assumed that the two young men were Rebanda's subordinates and referred to them as "draftsmen". It is more probable, though, that the pair had partially replaced him, since Jaffe, in a protest against the exclusion of many foreign researchers from sites, wrote that "In December 1994 IPPAR passed the responsibility for the rock art in the Coa valley to Mario Varela Gomes and Antonio Martinho Baptista." (See Jaffe – on-line comments) It is therefore more likely that they were out surveying for new sites that day, rather than playing hooky.

⁵⁰ After initially denigrating both the art and the idea of extracting it, the EDP later adopted the idea as one of its three strategies for overcoming opposition to the dam project. The first was to prove that the engravings were not Paleolithic – an effort that entrapped researchers who wanted to apply experimental direct-dating techniques. The second was to make casts of panels for a museum – which may have damaged some panels. And the third was extraction. Thus, the EDP eventually "...cut and removed a big schist panelled block (with no engravings) in order to establish that it would be possible also to remove original engraved surfaces to the above-mentioned museum" (Baptista & Fernandes 2007, p. 266).

⁵¹ Castelo Melhor